

Book Review

John Dewey and the Decline of American Education

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John Dewey and the Decline of American Education: How the Patron Saint of Schools Has Corrupted Teaching and Learning, by Henry T. Edmondson III. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books. 147 pp. pbk: ISBN 193223652X, \$15.00; hbk: ISBN 1932236511, \$25.00

Henry T. Edmondson's *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education* is a bold indictment of one of the fathers of modern educational thought and practice. Throughout this terse treatise, Edmondson places the blame for nearly every problem he perceives in today's schools on John Dewey. Edmondson believes that problems such as low literacy rates, teacher burnout, and the loss of traditional values in education can be linked to John Dewey's influence over schools in the United States.¹ Edmondson refutes Dewey's conceptions of religion, education, and democracy in his attempt to illustrate that education has been in decline for the last fifty years because of Dewey's influence. Edmondson attempts to lead students and teachers toward his goal of "disinheriting Dewey."² While Edmondson targets Dewey, a critical reading of this book reveals that Edmondson's argument is another conservative attack on education in the United States. Edmondson's critique of Dewey is in the vein of conservative scholars such as Allan Bloom and Diane Ravitch, who have voiced similar concerns regarding the loss of tradition in education.³ It is clear that Edmondson also believes that education can regain prominence only by abandoning Deweyan progressivism and embracing traditional Western values.

Edmondson chooses to begin his critique of John Dewey by condemning Dewey's rejection of organized religion. Edmondson asserts that Dewey, who was in fact a practicing Christian until his mid-thirties, wrongfully eschewed the mythology and ritualism of dogmatic religious practices such as Christianity. Edmondson argues that Dewey's enmity toward organized religion has been absorbed in American education and states, "Nowhere has genuine faith been more scorned,

both by condescension and hostility, than in the halls of the educational establishment.”⁴ To Edmondson, John Dewey’s rejection of religion has been adopted by the educational establishment and has led to the deterioration of morality and traditional values in education. Edmondson views this decline of morals in education as giving rise to many of the current problems that are plaguing modern schools. It is interesting to note that Edmondson begins his critique of Dewey not with an examination of Dewey’s educational philosophy, but rather with a detailed characterization of Dewey as an avowed secularist.

Edmondson’s chief argument against Dewey’s pedagogy is in regard to Dewey’s privileging experimentation over ritual and routine. Edmondson criticizes Dewey’s natural empiricism, arguing that classroom experimentation carries with it the risk that students will “suffer the experimenter’s mistakes.”⁵ Dewey believed that ongoing inquiry would lead to new possibilities and that mistakes were opportunities for further growth through educative experiences.⁶ In contrast, Edmondson argues that Deweyan experimentalism turns students into “lab rats.”⁷ Edmondson claims that Dewey’s classroom experimentalism has led to the erosion of teacher authority as well as the deterioration of a traditional standards-based curriculum. It is Edmondson’s contention that Dewey has replaced the traditional academic canon with a progressive pedagogy based on experimentation. According to Edmondson, Dewey’s experimentalism leaves students and teachers mired in uncertainty and erodes the moral fabric of human existence.

Throughout the midsection of the book, Edmondson further critiques Dewey’s progressivism by condemning Dewey’s various revolts against traditional education. Among the Deweyan revolts that Edmondson highlights are Dewey’s belief in student-directed activity, his eschewing of strict textbook learning, and his belief that education is primarily a social endeavor. Edmondson indicts Dewey for engaging in “a revolt against a canon of learning, a revolt against tradition, a revolt against moral standards, a revolt against logic—even a revolt against grammar and spelling.”⁸ To Edmondson, Dewey’s inclusion of individual student interests in the shaping of class activity is a revolt against the moral authority of the teacher. Dewey’s privileging of emergent activity over the study of textual information is a revolt against the canons that have shaped the traditional Western curriculum. Lastly, to Edmondson, Dewey’s conception of schools as social centers that promulgate reform is a revolt against the current status quo.

Edmondson devotes the latter part of his book to an examination of the political aspects of John Dewey’s philosophy. It is here that Edmondson asserts that Dewey has betrayed democracy by removing history from the canon of American education.⁹ Edmondson asserts that Dewey’s desire to ground education in present activity has led to a rejection of important historical tenets that all students in the United States should know. Dewey believed that historical information was important in the degree to which it informed current action, not simply as isolated facts that needed to be recounted or retold.¹⁰

Edmondson argues that not only is Dewey wrong here, but that Dewey’s im-

pact on education has left today's students without the core knowledge needed to participate in the country's democracy. Edmondson invokes Thomas Jefferson as he calls for a return to a Jeffersonian notion of education that promotes "moral, intellectual, and civic virtue," through the mastery of the canon of Western language and philosophy.¹¹ In contrast, Dewey had little interest in the preordained knowledge contained in traditional canons unless that knowledge was being used in the present to improve society as a whole. To Dewey, decontextualized historical facts are not nearly as important as how those facts can help remedy current social ills.

Edmondson concludes the book with his push for American education to disinherit the legacy of John Dewey. Throughout the last chapter Edmondson makes a series of bold allegations about current troubles he perceives in education and again attempts to connect those issues to Dewey. Edmondson claims that schools are inadequately funded, teachers are burned out, and parents no longer believe in American education. Edmondson claims that teachers are frustrated to "the point of tears" because of poorly conceived reform measures "imposed upon them from above by their own professions and bureaucracies."¹² Connecting John Dewey to teacher frustration over a never-ending barrage of externally mandated reform measures seems misguided. Dewey was not interested in promoting reforms that were developed by professional educators or persons that existed external to any individual classroom environment. A careful reading of Dewey's work reveals his disdain for externally directed curricular reforms, which seems to refute Edmondson's claim here. Dewey refined this position in *Democracy in Education*:

The vice of externally imposed ends has deep roots. Teachers receive them from superior authorities; these authorities accept them from what is current in the community. The teachers impose them upon children. As a first consequence, the intelligence of the teacher is not free; it is confined to receiving the aims laid down from above. Too rarely is the individual so free from the authoritative supervisor, textbook on methods, pre-scribed course of study, etc., that he can let his mind come to close quarters with the pupil's mind and the subject matter.¹³

Edmondson's blaming John Dewey's experimentalism for the plethora of professional reform movements that are thrust upon teachers seems to be a misappropriation of Deweyan empiricism. Dewey would not support the reforms of professional educators or other sophists willing to mandate a universal model for education. Dewey would leave reform to the teachers and students in each classroom, where knowledge would be consistently shaped and reformed by those most intimately involved in the educative process.

Edmondson concludes his work with another attempt to discredit Dewey by anointing him the "Devil of Educationism."¹⁴ Edmondson makes one of his boldest statements in the book in arguing that John Dewey really did not care about students and was simply promulgating his own political agenda. While Edmondson concedes that media and popular culture have undermined the family and the school, he maintains that John Dewey is equally responsible. Edmondson goes on

to state that Dewey is even responsible for inequitable funding practices. Edmondson asserts that “serious disparities exist in educational funding between schools,” and that the problem is “especially acute when minority and non-minority schools are compared.”¹⁵ While the problem of equitable funding for schools is a serious concern worthy of intense scrutiny, placing the responsibility for such a quagmire on John Dewey is specious. Dewey would most likely advocate that schools be the sites where problems such as inequitable financing could be debated until a remedy was discovered. However, Edmondson believes the Deweyan experimentalism is somehow to blame. Edmondson reiterates his disdain for Dewey in the closing pages of the book when he states that “Deweyan-inspired education is not progress toward something, it is movement away from the best ideas that the Western tradition has to offer.”¹⁶

In *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education*, Henry Edmondson embarks on a journey in which he confronts John Dewey’s influence over modern education in the United States. Edmondson’s task was no small feat, as Dewey was a prolific writer; however, Edmondson attempts to dismiss Dewey’s entire philosophy with a critique that is just over one hundred pages long. Edmondson’s text rejects Deweyan philosophy with a conservative framework that is not uncommon to recent critiques of education. It appears that Edmondson is too concerned with reclaiming essentialist notions of education to actually refute John Dewey. In his exhaustive account of Dewey’s life and philosophy, Alan Ryan argues that Dewey was a “visionary about the here and now, about the potentiality of the modern world, modern society, modern man . . . and Americans in the twentieth century.”¹⁷ Edmondson’s refutation of Dewey’s educational philosophy is based on the rejection of the potentiality that Dewey espoused. In fact, Edmondson’s critique is grounded in the very traditionalism that Dewey despised, and it sheds little new light on the complex nature of John Dewey’s philosophy.

Notes

1. Henry T. Edmondson III, *John Dewey and the decline of American education* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), xii.
2. Ibid., 95–114.
3. See, for example, Allan Bloom, *The closing of the American mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today’s students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); and Diane Ravitch, *Left back: A century of battles over school reform* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).
4. Edmondson, *John Dewey and the decline of American education*, 21.
5. Ibid., 30.
6. John Dewey, *Experience and education* (New York: Touchstone, 1938/1997), 25–26.
7. Edmondson, *John Dewey and the decline of American education*, 28.
8. Ibid., 56.
9. Ibid., 59–60.
10. John Dewey, *Democracy and education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1997), 214–216.

11. Edmondson, *John Dewey and the decline of American education*, 67.
12. Ibid., 97.
13. Dewey, *Democracy and education*, 108–109.
14. Edmondson, *John Dewey and the decline of American education*, 110.
15. Ibid., 111.
16. Ibid., 112.
17. Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the high tide of American liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1995), 369.

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The John Dewey Society for the Study of Education and Culture

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Members receive announcements, requests for papers and reports of Society activities; copies of *Insights* and *Education and Culture*, both occasional monographs written by and for members; and book-length publications of the annual John Dewey Lecture. We meet and provide a program of papers, symposia, and round tables at the American Educational Research Association and offer the John Dewey Memorial Lecture on topical issues at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. A subscription to *Educational Theory* is available at reduced rates. For more information or to become a member, see <http://johndewey-society.org/member.php>.

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